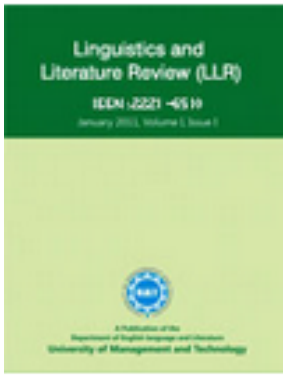

Linguistics and Literature Review (LLR)

Volume , Issue 2, October 2015

Journal DOI:
Issue DOI:

ISSN: 2221-6510 (Print) 2409-109X (Online) Journal homepage: http://journals.umt.edu.pk/llr/Home.aspx

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To cite to this article: Muhammad Umar Farooq, Yasmeen Fatima & Choudhary Zahid Javid (2015). Enhancing Writing Skills through Blogs in an Undergraduate English Language Classroom in Pakistan, *Linguistics and Literature Review* 1(2): 105- 118.

To link to this article:

Published online: October 31, 2015

Article QR Code:

A publication of the
Department of English Language and Literature
School of Social Sciences and Humanities
University of Management and Technology
Lahore, Pakistan

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DOI:

Enhancing Writing Skills through Blogs in an Undergraduate English Language Classroom in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT
Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs, have opened up new avenues of personal and professional communication. A blog is an online journal which can be continuously updated by its users (Matheson, 2004). Teachers are using blogs for activities and interaction with their students. The present study focused on using blogs for enhancing writing skills of undergraduate English language learners. A group of undergraduate English language learners was selected randomly and they were provided instructions through teacher's blog to improve their writing skills. Their writing skills (paragraph, essay and story writing) were assessed through pre-test and post-test focusing on structure, creativity and logical sequence of ideas. The finding revealed that they not only enhanced their writing skills but blogs created a collaborative learning environment as well.

Keywords: blogs, ELT, writing skills, collaborative learning

Introduction

As we enter the 21st century, information technology (IT) is encircling every field of life. IT has become a powerful tool to communicate with people around the world. It is faster, easier and more convenient to use than other older media. Specifically, the role of computers in language education is increasing worldwide. This is because learners of language, with the use of the Internet, can simultaneously communicate with other learners or speakers of the target language all over the world (Khamkhien, 2012**)**. According to Warschauer (1996), technology and the Internet play a vital role in teaching the second and foreign language as an aid to the teacher. As is evident, a large amount of foreign language materials available nowadays e.g., textbooks, program courses and dictionaries are included with and supplemented by other media such as CDs, videos, which require computer and technologies. Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is an approach to teaching and learning in which the computer and computer based resources are used for the learning of material. CALL has also been known by several other terms such as technology

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enhanced language learning, computer assisted language instruction and computer aided language learning but the field is the same. The use of CALL affects the development of language learner's four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Although, for the students of English as a foreign language, all the four skills are important, in Pakistan, most of the second language tests are conducted in the written form, so this research is targeting to improve the writing skills of students and will be more valuable for the students. New era has brought many changes in every field of life. The field of education has also got its share in advancement. The study using computer is not only important but has become a vital part of education. Like other areas of education, second language learning is also getting help from computers and internet. English language is considered official language in our country. Students face many problems in learning English. This research will help the students in getting knowledge about how to improve writing skills by creating blogs. Blogs let students compose writing with specific purposes that can encourage them to enhance their writing in the language constructively.

Objectives of the study

- To assess the effectiveness of blogs in developing writing skills of EFL students
- To evaluate improvement in structure among EFL students through using writing blogs
- To evaluate improvement in creativity among EFL students through using writing blogs
- To evaluate improvement in logical sequence of ideas among EFL students through using writing blogs

Literature review

In 1940s, technology was used in the field of education with the inception of radio with a purpose "to bring the world to the classroom, to make universally available the services of the finest teachers, the inspiration of the greatest leaders … and unfolding world events which through radio may become as a vibrant and challenging textbook of the air" (Norton & Sprague, 2001:1). Since then technological developments and education have been lined up together. Revolution in technology started in 1950s when IBM produced computers on commercial basis which affected education in many dimensions by introducing the concept of computer assisted language learning (CALL). Development continued in this respect for over forty years till the development of internet which is currently working as the backbone to support educational purposes in networked learning environments.

In recent years, with the fast development of the Internet technologies, language teaching and learning is undergoing a brand-new reform, which differs dramatically from the traditional language teaching and learning styles: textbooks, additional teaching materials and study strategies are so delicately designed and put into the web, by the means of computers, teachers can freely arrange, manipulate, direct and assess learning results of the learners, they even do not need go to classes so often than before. That is why nowadays many teachers use computer-aided contents. Technology also supported communicative language teaching (CLT) based on improving teacher-student and student-student interaction. Language learners could easily and freely communicate with/through a computer to learn a foreign language, anytime and anywhere. Compared with the

traditional language teaching and learning, Computer-aided language teaching and learning is both a big challenge and also a benefit to educators, as well as to CLT.

Computer assisted language learning changes the style of teaching thus making it interesting and more appealing to the students. There are evidences that the advantages of CALL include motivation, adapting learning to the students, authenticity and critical thinking skill. The use of technology inside the classroom makes the class more interesting. This interest increases the motivational level of the students. Computer can give a new role to the teaching materials. Adapting to the students not only controls the learning but also means that students can make choices in what and how to learn. Such control makes students feel more competent in their learning. Students prefer exercises where they have control over content, such as stories, puzzles or logic problems. With these, the computer provides attractive context for the use of language. Authenticity in language learning means the opportunity to interact in one or more of the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) by using texts in the target language, not the classroom. Students feel less afraid to contact others. Students believe that they learn faster and better with computer mediated communication (Farooq, 2011). Also, students learn more about culture in such an environment. In situation where all are learners of a foreign language, there is also a feeling of equality. In these situations students feel less stressed and more confident in a language learning situation.

Often CALL is not implemented even if training is offered to teachers. One reason for this is that from the 1960's to the 1980's, computer technology was limited mostly for the sciences. The use of computers in the field of language learning has brought major changes. There is a shift from traditional approach to collaborative and constructivist one. By the use of computers, teaching/ learning process could be improved by both teachers and students. Such a learning environment helps the students to learn all the language skills. In Pakistan, language classes are treated as the most passive ones where a teacher plays an active role and s/he is all in all. Amongst the language skills, writing is given importance as all the exams are paper based. With the introduction of technology at various levels in Pakistani education system, writing may be made interesting and creative for advanced level students.

Today Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs, are presenting both teachers and learners with new horizons in the field of language teaching and learning (Vurdien, 2011). The term *blog* is a contraction of two words: *web* and *log*. Blogs are a tool for written communication and interaction. A blog is a personal or professional journal that is frequently updated and intended for general public communication. Oxford Dictionary defines blog as "A frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary." A weblog (or blog) is a web-based space for writing where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser and is immediately and publicly available on the Internet (Godwin, 2003). Blogs are used in different fields as well as in education and training. Since its inception, blogs have become popular in the higher education and research. Researches have been published on the effectiveness of blogs on students writing fluency, posting class materials, outside classroom

communication, critical thinking (Ward, 2004; Johnson 2004; Wu, 2005; Pinkman, 2005; Vurdien, 2011). In language learning the use of blogs is described as a way to "help students explore and assimilate new ideas, create links between familiar and the unfamiliar, mull over possibilities, [and explain] them to others. The analogue for this kind of student writing is the expert's notebook…" (McLeod 2001 as cited in Lowe, 2004, p. 152).

Research design

This research, lasted for six months, engaged students in writing through personal blogs. As an experimental, pre- and post-test study, the purpose was to see the relative effectiveness of independent variable i.e. teaching methodology on dependent variable that is the performance of students in the writing skills. For this purpose the researchers selected a group of 20 students studying computer science. They were taught writing skills through teacher and personal blogs. The comparison of pre- and post-test results showed the relative improvement in the experimental group. Three types of activities; paragraph writing, essay writing and story writing, were selected to judge the writing skills of the students. Assessment criteria included; language (structure), creativity and logical sequence of ideas.

Data analysis

Analysis of participants' performance in pre-intervention test

The performance of the students in pre-intervention test was analyzed through percentile in their paragraph, essay and story writing skills. Total obtained marks as well as the obtained marks in each writing skill were analyzed to assess overall performance of students in pretest. The following table shows the scores of the participants of the study in paragraph writing, essay writing and story writing in pre-intervention test.

Table 1. Detail of pre-intervention marks obtained in paragraph, essay and story writing

Writing tasks	Writing dynamics	Total Marks	Marks Obtained	%age
Paragraph writing		**15**	**6.125**	**40%**
	Language Structure	5	1.875	38%
	Creativity	5	2.2	44%
	Logical sequence of ideas	5	2.02	41%
Essay Writing		**15**	**5.425**	**36%**
	Language Structure	5	1.625	33%
	Creativity	5	1.95	39%
	Logical sequence of ideas	5	1.85	37%
Story Writing		**15**	**5.575**	**37%**
	Language Structure	5	1.7	34%
	Creativity	5	1.975	40%
	Logical sequence of ideas	5	1.9	38%

In pre-intervention assessment, the topics were assigned by the researchers to be completed in specified time. The overall percentage (38%) shows that students were weak in writing skills (paragraph, essay and story writing) whereas the weakest area was essay writing. Performance of the students was analyzed in terms of language (structure), creativity and logical sequence of ideas.

Table 1 reflects that the weakest area in students' writing was language structure (40% in paragraph, 36% in essay and 37% in story writing). The pre-intervention test showed weaknesses in students' writing skills including lack of ideas, poor sentence structure, no creativity, improper vocabulary, unimpressive style, poor paragraph construction, illogical sequence of ideas, structural errors, etc.

Treatment phase

The analysis of the participants' performance in pretest assessment showed that students were weak and they needed some treatment to improve their written language. Instead of using the traditional methods in the treatment phase, the researchers used CALL (computer assisted language learning) application 'Blog' using the websitehttp://www.blogger.com. The blog helps to share thoughts, photos, and more with friends and the world. It is easy to post (add) text, photos and videos from the web. It has unlimited flexibility to personalize blogs with themes, gadgets (online windows having different types of information) and more. To create participants' blogs, the researchers helped them to make their e-mail addresses and then with the help of their e-mail accounts. The participants then entered the blogger website and created their blogs. The main concern of the participants was to write assignments given by the researchers on the blog so that it could be accessible to other students as well as teachers. Different gadgets were added to the researchers' blog to make it interesting for the participants. Material on paragraph writing, essay writing and story writing was added to help the participants to write creatively. After identifying and generalizing the problems in the scripts submitted by the students, they were provided guidance especially focusing on structure, creativity and logical sequencing of ideas.

Analysis of participants' performance in post-intervention test

The performance of the participants in post-intervention test was analyzed keeping in view all the three questions in the post- intervention test. Total obtained marks as well as the obtained marks of individual questions were analyzed by using Individual-samples T-test to see the overall performance of students in post-test as well as to determine whether any significant differences existed in their pretest and posttest assessment.

Analysis of participants' performance in paragraph writing

A comparison has been made between the results of paragraph writing language (structure) of pre-intervention and post-intervention to analyze the improvement of the participants' performance after the treatment phase.

Table 2. Data analyses "Paragraph Writing and its dynamics"

	Writing Task / Dynamics	Group	n	M	SD	T	Df	p value	
1	Paragraph Writing	Pretest	20	6.125	1.532	-7.507-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	8.65	1.666	-7.507-	37.739	.000	
2	Language Structure	Pretest	20	1.9	.6256	-5.224-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	2.6	.5525	-5.224-	37.427	.000	
3	Creativity	Pretest	20	2.2	.6261	-8.090-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	3.1	.5849	-8.090-	37.825	.000	
4	Logical sequence of ideas	Pretest	20	2.1	.5642	-6.030-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	3	.7587	-6.030-	35.095	.000	

Table 2 shows that participants' performance enhanced from 6.125 to 8.65 in paragraph writing assessment. Significant gains were reported in language structure, creativity and logical sequence of ideas in paragraph writing as evident by p-value. Another important aspect which reflects improvement is that there were 40% participants who scored less than 40% in pre-intervention which reduced to 5% in post-intervention in language (structure), from 15% to 0% in creativity and logical sequencing of ideas.

Analysis of Participants' Performance in Essay writing

The results of pre- intervention and post- intervention essay writing assessment have been compared to analyze the performance of the participants.

Table 3. Data analyses "Essay writing and its dynamics"

	Writing Task / Dynamics	Group	n	M	SD	T	Df	p value	
1	Essay Writing	Pretest	20	5.425	1.330	-5.236-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	9.225	2.460	-5.236-	29.235	.000	
2	Language Structure	Pretest	20	1.625	.5712	-4.135-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	2.6	.7880	-4.135-	34.647	.000	
3	Creativity	Pretest	20	1.95	.5729	-4.831-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	3.5	.9787	-4.831-	30.654	.000	
4	Logical sequence of ideas	Pretest	20	1.85	.5281	-4.890-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	3.125	.9357	-4.890-	29.990	.000	

Table 3 reflects that the participants' performance in essay writing enhanced from 5.425 in the pre-test to 9.225 in the post-test. They improved their language structure from1.625 in the pre-test to 2.6, creativity from 1.95 to 3.5 and logical sequencing of ideas from 1.85 to 3.125. In pre-test, 55% participants scored less than 40% in language (structure) whereas it reduced 5% in the post-test. Likewise, the percentile reduced from 25% to 0% in creativity and from and 25% to 10% in

logical sequencing of ideas. Furthermore, extremely low p-value suggested significant post-intervention gain as revealed by results generated by Independent-samples t-test.

Analysis of participants' performance in story writing

The results of pre-test and post-test story writing have been compared to analyze the performance of the students.

Table 4. Data analyses "Story writing and its dynamics"

	Writing Task / Dynamics	Group	n	M	SD	T	Df	p value	
1	Story Writing	Pretest	20	5.575	3.641	-7.286-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	8.85	4.574	-7.286-	36.181	.000	
2	Language Structure	Pretest	20	1.7	1.375	-6.303-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	2.6	1.148	-6.303-	36.826	.000	
3	Creativity	Pretest	20	1.975	1.532	-7.507-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	3.2	1.666	-7.507-	37.739	.000	
4	Logical sequence of ideas	Pretest	20	1.9	1.330	-5.236-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	3.075	2.460	-5.236-	29.235	.000	

In story writing, as evident from Table 4, the participants' performance increased from 5.575 to 8.85 in story writing. Table 4 reflects that participants' scores increased in structure (from 1.7 to 2.6), creativity (from 1.975 to 3.2) and logical sequencing of ideas (from 1.9 to 3.075) in pre-intervention and post-intervention assessment. In pre-intervention test, 60% students scored less than 40% in language (structure) whereas it reduced 30% in the post-intervention test. Likewise, the percentile reduced from 25% to 15% in creativity and from and 20% to 15% in logical sequencing of ideas.

Analysis of participants' over-all performance

Table 5. Data analyses "All writing tasks and their dynamics"

	Writing Task / Dynamics	Group	n	M	SD	T	Df	p value	
1	Writing Tasks (Collective)	Pretest	20	17.12	1.130	-5.036-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	26.65	2.240	-5.336-	31.135	.000	
2	Language Structure(Collective)	Pretest	20	6.125	.8892	-4.235-	37	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	8.65	.8850	-4.335-	32.047	.000	
3	Creativity (Collective)	Pretest	20	5.425	.7859	-4.561-	38	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	9.225	1.017	-4.761-	31.454	.000	
4	Logical sequence of ideas (Collective)	Pretest	20	5.575	.6781	-4.990-	39	.000	p < 0.05
		posttest	20	8.85	.9997	-4.870-	30.690	.000	

Table 5 reflects overall performance of the students in pre-intervention and post-intervention assessment which was 17.12 and 26.65 respectively. It shows the effectiveness of blogs in developing writing skills of the students; paragraph writing (6.125 to 8.65), essay writing (5.425 to 9.225) and story writing (5.575 to 8.85). Furthermore, Independent-samples t-test revealed statistically significant gains in post-intervention assessment of participants' performance in writing skills.

Discussion

English is taught as a foreign language in all the Pakistani educational institutions and to cope with the global trends in education, it has been included in the school curriculum as a compulsory subject. With the growth of technology, blogs are being used by the teachers to develop language skills, especially writing skills, of the students around the world. The present study reflected that the blogs helped students to improve their writing skills. The pre-test showed weaknesses in students' writing skills including inaccurate structure, improper vocabulary, no creativity, illogical start of paragraphs and construction, problems in grammar and sequencing ideas, etc. The effective use of blogs improved their writing skills from 38% to 59% as evident from their results in pre- and post-tests. A study conducted by Kavaliaus kiene & Vaiciuniene (2006) also indicated that the experience of writing on blogs provides opportunities to help students improve their knowledge of English (Kavaliauskien, 2006). In this study, students performed better in terms of language (structure), creativity and logical sequence of ideas in post-test. They improved their language/structure in paragraph writing (38% to 53%), essay writing (33% to 52%) and story writing (34% to 52%). Blogs offered students a way to improve their writing skills and encounter new ideas through interaction with other students. Blogs allow students to easily link to resources that support their assertions, and thereby encourage critical thinking. In present research, students' creative/critical thinking skills enhanced in paragraph writing (44% to 62%), essay writing (39% to 70%) and story writing (40% to 64%). The students engaged in collaborative learning through their interactions with others which serves as a catalyst for critical thinking. Blogs foster critical thinking by encouraging students to evaluate what they read and write. At the same time their skills in sequencing ideas improved in paragraph writing (41% to 59%), essay writing (37% to 63%) and story writing (38% to 62%). Through interaction, students get engaged in collaborative learning which serves as a catalyst for critical thinking (Zhang, 2009). So writing blogs offers students a way to improve their writing skills and encounter new ideas through interaction with other students. Publishing reflective commentaries on the Internet is an effective way for students to share each other's reviews. Not only will readership increase, when students see each other's works, they can learn from one another, thereby motivating them to produce better reviews as well (Zhang, 2009).Within a constructivist philosophy of English writing, learners are the determinants of the structure and sequence of their knowledge construction. Ultimately, the learner is responsible for his or her own writing and the teacher acts as a facilitator to guide the students writing. From a cognitive perspective, writing is made more meaningful when it is integrated within the learner's prior knowledge (Galina, 2006). Most blog writers use blogs environment for self-expression and empowerment, as writing blogs helps people become more thoughtful and

critical in their writing (Blood, 2002). The Blog appears to enrich the learning experience and provide an opportunity for learners to shift from surface to deeper levels of learning as it helps them seek out connections between concepts, and contextualize meaning.

Conclusion

As Krause (2005) posits, blogs can be ‘‘a more inviting and interactive space for our students to write in’’ (p. 33). In Pakistan, technology is paving its way into educational activities as it provides learning tools to teachers and students. Blogs have been found an effective and interesting way for ESL students to practice and to publish their writing. Blogging provides students a space to share their writing in an interactive social environment. As evident, it motivated students to improve their writing in terms of structure, creativity and logical sequencing of ideas. Blogs also increase students' interest and ownership in learning. Students direct their own learning about topics important to them, while receiving feedback from others. Blogging also offers a useful learning environment that gives the students a chance to create a strong sense of community in which they can participate actively while learning.

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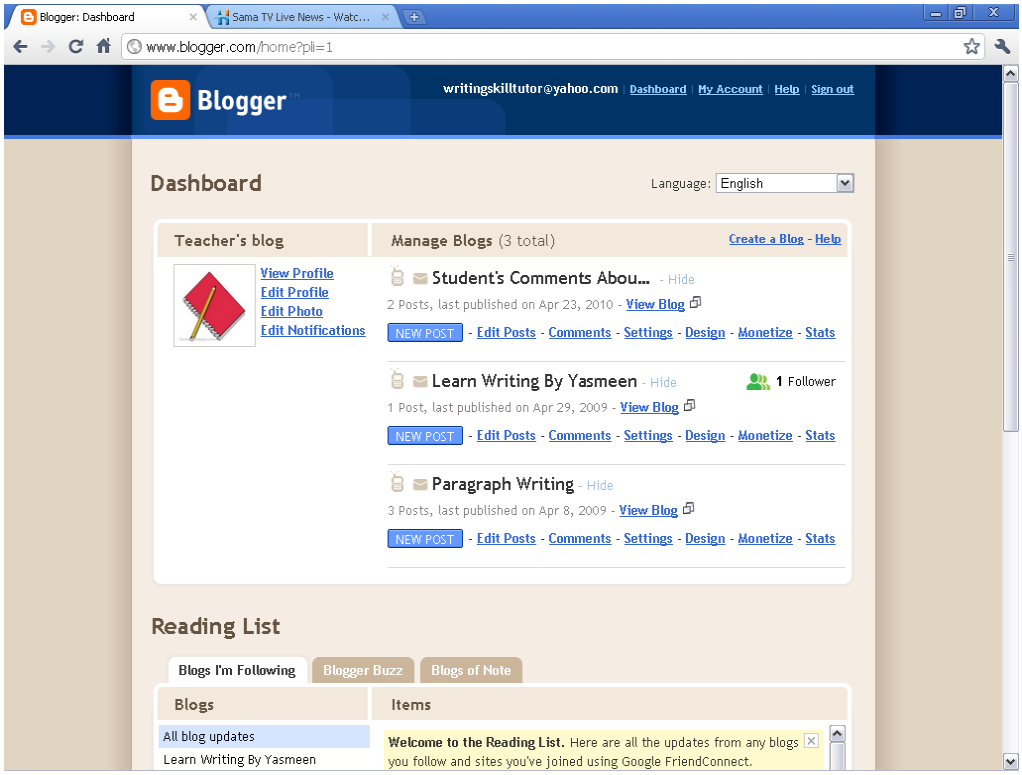
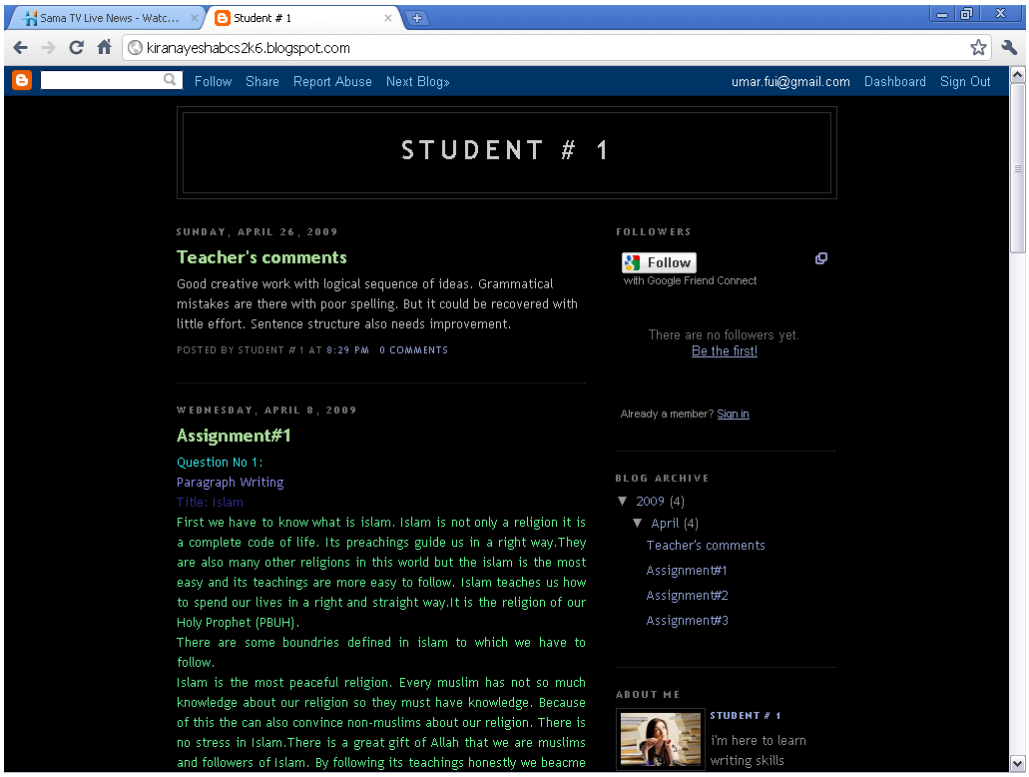
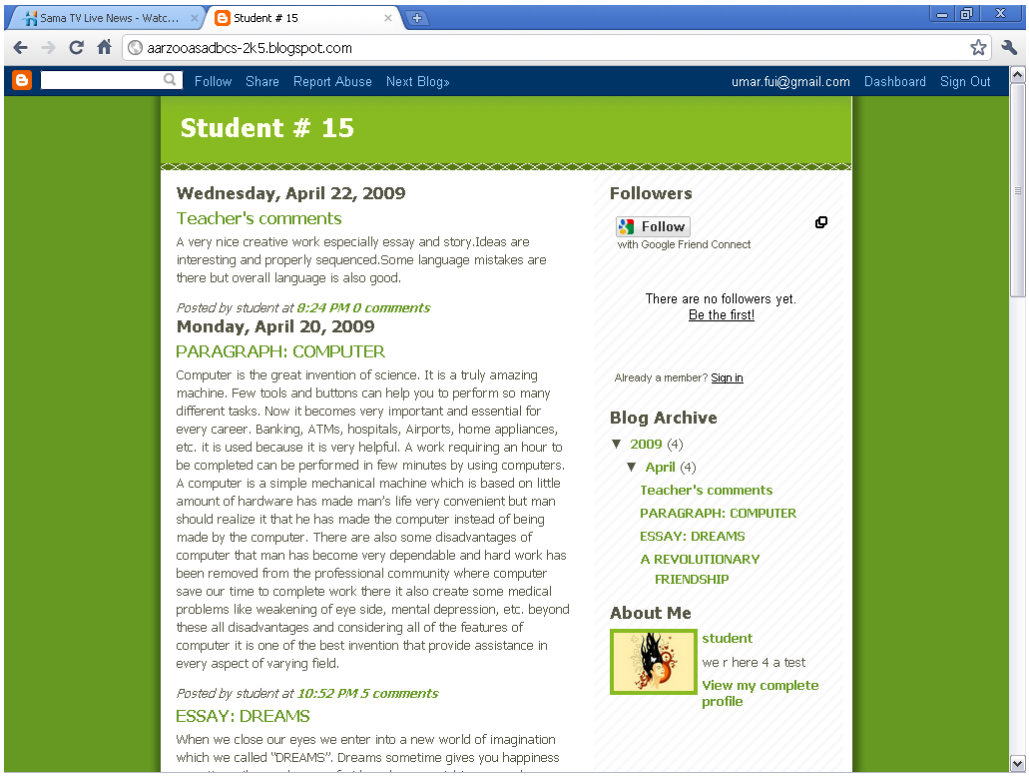
Appendix

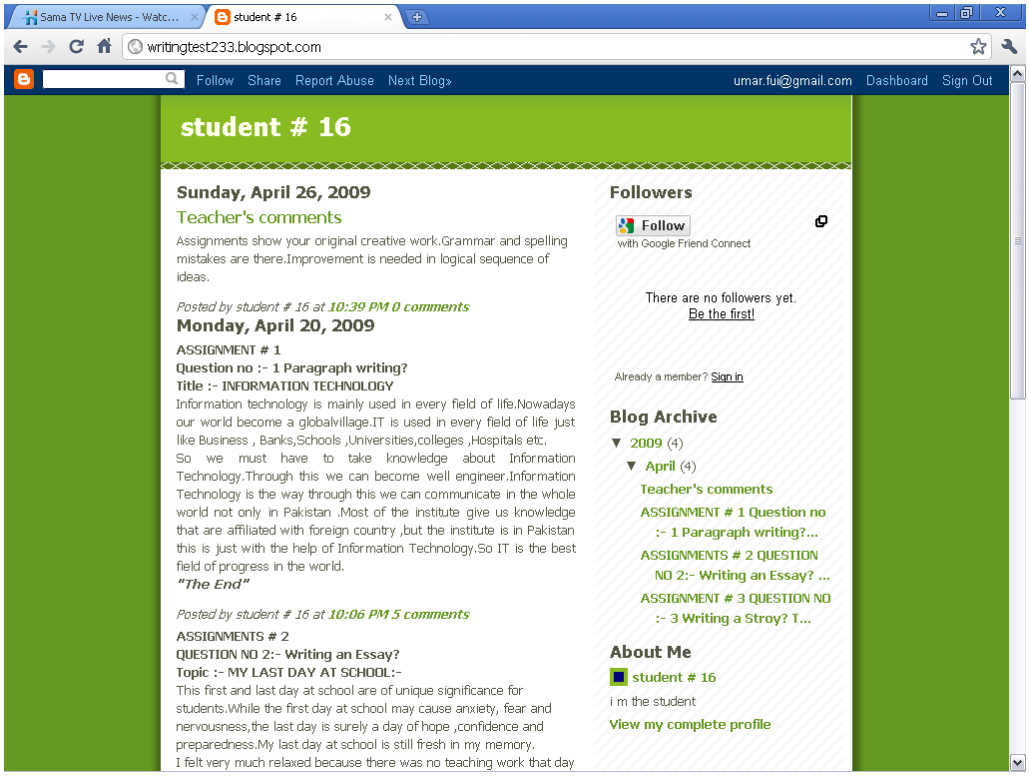
Teacher's Blog

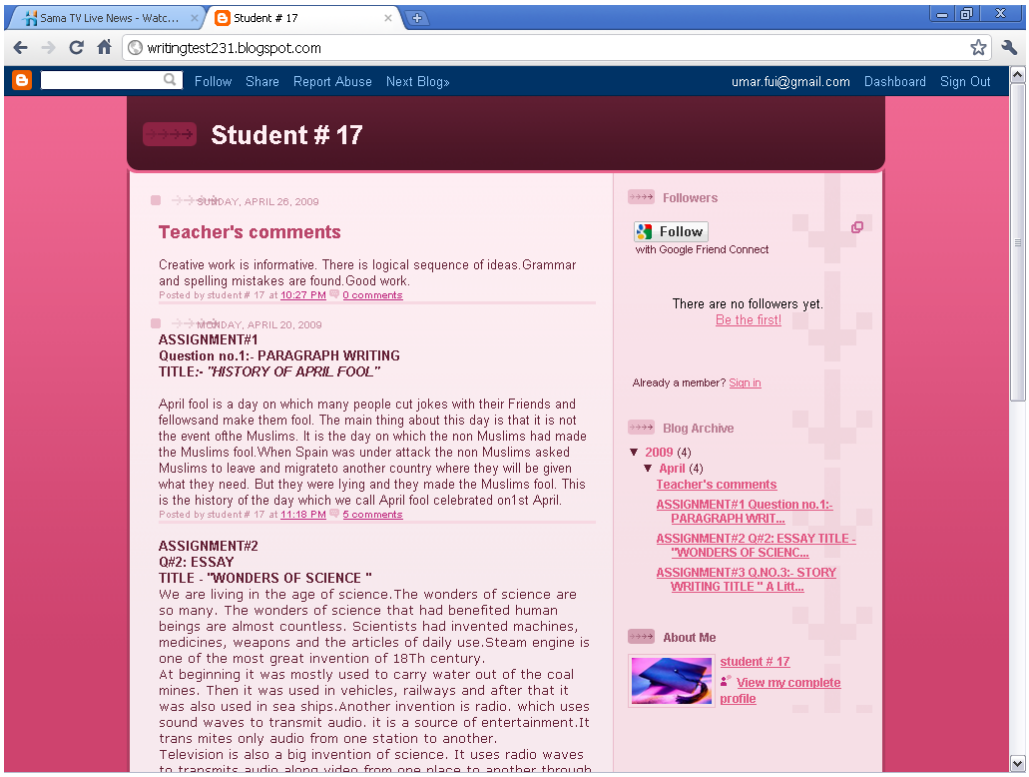


Students' Blogs






Sama TV Live News - Watc...
student # 16
writingtest233.blogspot.com
Follow Share Report Abuse Next Blog»
umar.fui@gmail.com Dashboard Sign Out
student # 16
Sunday, April 26, 2009
Teacher's comments
Assignments show your original creative work.Grammar and spelling mistakes are there.Improvement is needed in logical sequence of ideas.
Posted by student # 16 at 10:39 PM 0 comments
Monday, April 20, 2009
ASSIGNMENT # 1
Question no :- 1 Paragraph writing?
Title :- INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Information technology is mainly used in every field of life.Nowadays our world become a globalvillage.IT is used in every field of life just like Business , Banks,Schools ,Universities,colleges ,Hospitals etc.
So we must have to take knowledge about Information Technology.Through this we can become well engineer.Information Technology is the way through this we can communicate in the whole world not only in Pakistan .Most of the institute give us knowledge that are affiliated with foreign country ,but the institute is in Pakistan this is just with the help of Information Technology.So IT is the best field of progress in the world.
"The End"
Posted by student # 16 at 10:06 PM 5 comments
ASSIGNMENTS # 2
QUESTION NO 2:- Writing an Essay?
Topic :- MY LAST DAY AT SCHOOL:-
This first and last day at school are of unique significance for students.While the first day at school may cause anxiety, fear and nervousness,the last day is surely a day of hope ,confidence and preparedness.My last day at school is still fresh in my memory.
I felt very much relaxed because there was no teaching work that day
Followers
Follow
with Google Friend Connect
There are no followers yet.
Be the first!
Already a member? Sign in
Blog Archive
▼ 2009 (4)
▼ April (4)
Teacher's comments
ASSIGNMENT # 1 Question no :- 1 Paragraph writing?...
ASSIGNMENTS # 2 QUESTION NO 2:- Writing an Essay? ...
ASSIGNMENT # 3 QUESTION NO :- 3 Writing a Stroy? T...
About Me
student # 16
i m the student
View my complete profile


Sama TV Live News - Watc...
Student # 17
writingtest231.blogspot.com
Follow Share Report Abuse Next Blog»
umar.fui@gmail.com Dashboard Sign Out
Student # 17
SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 2009
Teacher's comments
Creative work is informative. There is logical sequence of ideas.Grammar and spelling mistakes are found.Good work.
Posted by student # 17 at 10:27 PM 0 comments
MONDAY, APRIL 20, 2009
ASSIGNMENT#1
Question no.1:- PARAGRAPH WRITING
TITLE:- "HISTORY OF APRIL FOOL"
April fool is a day on which many people cut jokes with their Friends and fellowsand make them fool. The main thing about this day is that it is not the event ofthe Muslims. It is the day on which the non Muslims had made the Muslims fool.When Spain was under attack the non Muslims asked Muslims to leave and migrateto another country where they will be given what they need. But they were lying and they made the Muslims fool. This is the history of the day which we call April fool celebrated on1st April.
Posted by student # 17 at 11:18 PM 5 comments
ASSIGNMENT#2
Q#2: ESSAY
TITLE - "WONDERS OF SCIENCE "
We are living in the age of science.The wonders of science are so many. The wonders of science that had benefited human beings are almost countless. Scientists had invented machines, medicines, weapons and the articles of daily use.Steam engine is one of the most great invention of 18Th century.
At beginning it was mostly used to carry water out of the coal mines. Then it was used in vehicles, railways and after that it was also used in sea ships.Another invention is radio. which uses sound waves to transmit audio. it is a source of entertainment.It trans mites only audio from one station to another.
Television is also a big invention of science. It uses radio waves
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